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By Vivion Kilfeather

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THE Government's decision to cut overseas financial aid by €222 million this year prompted a demonstration on the streets of Dublin yesterday by members of non-governmental aid agencies throughout Ireland.

A total of 222 people – one for every €1m cut from the aid budget this year – gathered outside the Department of Finance to call on the Government to reverse its cutback decision at the official launch of the Government's Irish Aid annual report for last year.

The demonstrators were drawn from Dochas, the Irish Association of Non-Governmental Developmental Organisation, which wants the Government to "get back on track" with its overseas aid promise to reach the 0.7% target by 2012.

At the launch of the report Minister of State for Overseas Development Peter Power countered the criticism by saying that despite the cuts this year "we are still the sixth largest donor in the world in per capita terms". Mr Power emphasised his commitment to ensuring the fight against global hunger remains a cornerstone of the aid programme.

Ireland's development assistance was €920m last year compared with a projected spend of €696m this year.

Mr Power said the reduction in the budget involved very difficult decisions and was part of a vital overall effort to stabilise the public finances and to provide a basis for future expansion of the aid programme.

He added: "We have refocused our programme on eradicating hunger and poverty and are committed to making our aid even more effective. Our engagement in overseas development is as strong as ever."

Malcolm Quigley, director the Voluntary Services Overseas Ireland, and spokesman for the protesters said, however, that the aid budget should not be cut as it was having a tremendous positive effect on the lives of poor people worldwide.

"We know Ireland has a lot on its plate right now and we are reeling from the impact of the recession, but we are calling on the Government not to forget those who are suffering even more from the global crisis, the billion people in the world's poorest countries."

Derek McDowell, head of advocacy for Concern, said: "We made a promise to the world and promised to spend a certain percentage of our national income, comparable to just 70 cent in every €10, on helping less fortunate countries."

Last week the NGOs made a presentation to the Oireachtas Foreign Affairs Committee showing that the aid cuts were already having a devastating impact on people living in poverty.

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